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The Philosopher's Stone

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

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What do you mean?

by Eric Verhine

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" – this decree opens Albert Camus' seminal essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus." With this thought, granted, Camus only rewords Hamlet's famous question – "To be or not to be?" – but he seeks also in his essay to *explain* why a person might commit suicide, whereas Shakespeare seeks to *show* it. (This is the basic difference between artistic and didactic literature). Camus maintains that one fundamental reason why someone might commit suicide is that she thinks that life has no meaning, or that she loses her sense or apprehension of that meaning. She comes, through whatever causes, to believe her life to be purposeless, her sufferings pointless, and her pursuits endless. Thus, Camus interprets the act of suicide as a confession that life "is not worth the trouble." Moreover, the act of suicide implies that a person has "recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering." Camus concludes, "the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions."

Indeed it is, even for one whom the thought of suicide has never charmed. When one looks eyes-open on what Hegel called the "slaughter-bench" of history, that endless epic of maelstrom and tumult which relates countless murders, treacheries, lusts, lies, and holocausts, or when one bewails eyes-shut the unfairness of death, or when one watches Alzheimer's Disease regress one's grandfather's once mature mind to a state of childishness and even infancy, or when unseen, unprovoked sorrows pummel one's heart, then one asks, "Why?" That question itself lays bare how essential meaning is to the human heart: so essential that it is assumed in the question. For the question is not "is there a 'why?', a meaning to this suffering," but instead, "what is that meaning?" or simply "why?". It is as if meaning is so emotionally necessary that the emotions themselves initially limit, in the question being asked, the extent of skepticism regarding meaning. Nevertheless, let us affirm with Camus that these "facts the heart can feel" yet call for careful study. Thus let us turn to a philosophical humor, and begin our questioning.

What is meaning? Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote (and this is a paraphrase) that every subject of thought is difficult when one thinks vigorously about it. This seems especially to be the case with regard to meaning. One must assiduously ponder what it means for life and experience to have meaning. (I hope that all who plan to attend the PDG meeting in which we will discuss this issue will think especially about this). From my own reading and reflection, I have come up with the following seemingly simplistic explanation of meaning. *To say that life has meaning is to say that it has some value, some importance, some coherence or intelligibility that makes it worth living.* With regard to individual existence, one might speak of one's own worth, significance in the universe, and purpose. With regard to the whole of history and reality, one might speak of meaning as an ordering, a patterning, by some transcendent or superior power.

Why is meaning important? What does it provide? As one could discern from the introduction to this essay, Camus, along with many others, assumes that meaning provides a reason for living. Langdon Gilkey states the traditional assumptions most lucidly when he writes that assurance of meaning "gives confidence, courage, and self-affirmation to our common being in the world; it gives direction to our common projects and our acts… it provides comfort and intelligibility [i.e. explanation] in the face of discouragement and tragedy; and it gives hope for our future even in possible grimness and suffering of the present."

Is belief in meaning justified or justifiable? To summon Hamlet again – that's the question, at least philosophically. Is there such a thing, external to one's own thinking, as meaning, and is one's sense of meaning reliable? Does one discover a pattern in history and reality, or does one create or imaginatively impose a pattern on and over the "facts" and events? As these questions frame the issue, there are two possible responses: either one believes in meaning or one does not.

For those who believe that life has meaning there are two questions which demand answers. The first question asks about the source of meaning. What is it that provides or furnishes meaning? One group would maintain that meaning is the gift solely of religion. Only belief in God, or some superior power, they would say, can justify or make sense of the claim that one's life, the history from which one has descended, and the reality in which one moves have purpose and significance. The substances and energies of nature, they suppose, are blind and without intention and thus cannot direct themselves except in a random matter; only some supernatural or transcendent principle can direct them to be so orderly and uniform. They suppose, likewise, that a universe of only natural forces and material components would be inherently meaningless; only if some divine, transcendent subject looks down and breathes upon it can life be more than unmeaning happenstance. It is, of course, religion that teaches about this principle or being and thus reveals both *that* and *why* living is meaningful and reality and history are orderly.

Important to note here is that many of those who maintain this view often categorize such philosophies as Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Marxism as religions, since they rest ultimately and somewhat transparently on assumptions that are neither logically nor empirically verifiable. For instance, the protestant theologian Reinhold Neibuhr classified Marxism as a religion because, for Neibuhr, any theory or philosophy which possesses a "vision of the whole of history and of its direction leading to a culmination," a vision which provides a meaning extending to all people and reality, is necessarily accepted on faith. Indeed such a philosophy functions and is appropriated "religiously."

Might there be other sources of meaning? (Think also on this, another important question the PDG will address in the meeting). If there are other sources, what are they? Are humans legitimate sources of meaning, and why? How does one answer the charge that all human

systems of meaning are relative, transitory, and, as Neibuhr would say, unjustifiable by means of reason?

And that is the other question, a question that all believers in meaning, be they religious or not, must answer to be rational in their belief: how does one justify one's belief in meaning? What kind of argument could one generate to justify one's belief? Is it mere subjective sense, or is there some line of reasoning that shows the existence of meaning?

Now let us turn to those who hold that the world is meaningless. What do they have to say about meaning? To put it simply, meaning is not discovered or sensed, according to this faction – meaning is imagined. When I was a child I had the misfortune of losing one of my favorite tennis shoes in quicksand. It was gone forever, but I could not accept this. So, I resolved to imagine, as I walked home, that I was still wearing the shoe. However, my pestering self-consciousness of rocks and sand and grass forced me to accept that no matter how hard I imagined, I could never restore the sunken shoe to my aching foot. But suppose I had never accepted the reality of my joyless loss, then, the philosophers of meaninglessness would say, I would be acting similarly to those who believe in meaning: trudging around struggling to imagine realities that are not real and which actual experience betrays.

I must confess that in my more skeptical, late night thoughts I agree with them. Moreover, I venture sometimes that meaning is not so essential to human life, or at least did not have to be. Perhaps even Camus, one of the philosophers of meaninglessness, is wrong here. Perhaps Western culture has inculcated in everyone the need for meaning the way television advertisements inculcate needs for car and status and beauty. I grew up in a family that attended church religiously, and must have heard a thousand times that I would not be happy unless I gave my life to God. After a while, I came to believe it, even though little in my actual experience confirmed that abstract principle. Perhaps meaning is just another abstraction, like happiness, that a religion, economic philosophy, or even government can use for proselytizing. Or perhaps the need for meaning has not been inculcated at all, but the abstraction "meaning" is a useful verbal formula for mediating, via language, untouchable emotion and physical pain. Perhaps a sense of meaninglessness and despair has nothing to do with suicide, but serves those who kill themselves as an explanation for a pain or sickness they do not understand, and serves those of us who continue living as an explanation and thus check for a random impulse we fear in ourselves.

But let us, for now, accept the conventional opinion that meaninglessness is difficult to handle. Or have we not already gotten ahead of ourselves in accepting this? For, must we not demand from the believer in meaninglessness how she knows that there is no meaning? Indeed we must; the burden of proof must be accepted here by both sides, especially in a matter of such supposed significance. It is not enough, at least not logically, to refute or reject certain systems of meaning; rather, one must also show positively how one knows that reality lacks meaning. But how is one to show that the reality is meaningless? Can one show this, or is it just subjective sense? It might surprise one to learn that the philosophers of meaninglessness (such as Sartre) often do not base their judgements of meaninglessness on rational arguments, but on amply subjective and always objectionable grounds (for Sartre it was phenomenology), and, of course, on their negative refutations of those who believe in meaning. Most of the time they do not argue, but assert.

Suppose, however, that their assertion is right, that life and reality lacks meaning or purpose. The other, and traditionally most important, question those who believe in meaninglessness must answer is how one can and should live in a world without meaning. One possibility is what Camus calls "the sleep that is necessary to life:" forming routines and habits (such as a job) or taking up "diversions" that keep one busy, declining before the television every night, hooking oneself on minute pleasures like food, drugs, or pornography – doing all this and more to avoid thinking about or experiencing, and thus facing, the weightier, more ambiguous and frightening, and – dare I say it? – more meaningful side of existence. My complaint against television is not that it shows sex or violence, but that one can spend several hours watching it and think about nothing more significant than the humor in that last quip, or how cute that actor is, or whether the contestant will actually be able to eat the cup of worms. How insipid, how banal, how trivial it is! Yet it continues to be the most effective sleeping pill in America.

What about those who want to face up to the meaninglessness? How are they to live? Is suicide the appropriate answer? (Again, this will be a major topic of discussion). For Camus, to return and end with our new friend, the answer is No. No. Suicide does not necessarily follow from the realization that one lives in a meaningless reality. On the contrary, this realization becomes one's reason for living. For, when one accepts meaninglessness and defies it, when one refuses to yield to either illusion (religion) or despair, then one is most noble. Moreover, if life has no meaning, then humans are absolutely free. It is as if meaning carries a good deal of baggage with it, baggage like determinism, moral obligation, and innate wickedness. The nihilist (another term for a philosopher or believer in meaninglessness) however, is free to drop this baggage and race lightly into a world of new possibility, in which one accepts, as Heidegger would say, that one's most necessary possibility is death. But that death must not come by one's own hand. Rather, it is imperative, Camus writes, "to die unreconciled and *not of one's own free will*."

You are invited to attend our next PDG meeting, in which we will discuss the issue of meaning and the questions raised in this essay. Our meeting will be on Wednesday, April 17. The meeting will be at 7:30 in the Honor's Lounge in Gamble Hall.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Eric Verhine or Dr. Nordenhaug. This is the last PDG meeting of the semester, but if anyone is interested in writing a brief article for the Philosopher's Stone sometime next year, please contact either of us. There will be no PDG meetings held during the summer.

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